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ABSTRACT

A project in Sweden focuses on the early linguistic development of preschool deaf children in families where the parents are also deaf. The School for the Deaf in Sweden is involved with describing the Swedish language as it appears to a deaf learner, a description to be used as a basis for teacher training and inservice in the teaching of the deaf. Swedish taught to the deaf should be imparted in sign language with the written mode as a complement to the "spoken" mode of sign language. There is a need for a written Swedish as an independent system since the available descriptions of Swedish (upon which the deaf rely) treat written Swedish as an (imperfect) representation of spoken Swedish. (SW)

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| Title of project | Sign language and the learning of Swedish by deaf children (Project TSD) |
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| Performed at | The Department of Linguistics<br>Stockholm University<br>S-106 91 STOCKHOLM<br>tel 08 - 16 20 00 |
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NEWSLETTERS 1979, 1980, 1981 and 1982.

| No. | Title |
|---|---|
| 1979:1 | Social segregation in comprehensive schools in Sweden |
| 1979:2 | Pedagogics and the school environment |
| 1979:3 | Elementary School Studies for Adults |
| 1979:4 | The NBE and School of Education Development Study (SLU) |
| 1979:5 | School-home-leisure |
| 1979:6 | List of Projects 1979/80 |
| 1979:7 | Internationalization in popular education (INFA) |
| 1980:1 | Pupils' thinking and course requirements in science teaching (EKNA) |
| 1980:2 | Marks and assessments in school |
| 1980:3 | Continuous admissions at AMU centres (SINAMU) |
| 1980:4 | Follow-up of school management training (USU) |
| 1980:5 | Special pedagogics in pre-school education (SIF) |
| 1980:6 | Problem-oriented co-operation between teachers, pupils and parents (POSLEF) |
| 1980:7 | List of Projects 1980/81 |
| 1980:8 | Evaluation of an experimental SYO organization |
| 1980:9 | Models for the bilingual instruction of immigrant children |
| 1981:1 | Integration of the profoundly deaf and severely hearing impaired in ordinary classes |
| 1981:2 | The PANG Project. Process Analysis of Non-Grading. |
| 1981:3 | Preconditions of change in schools (FISK) |
| 1981:4 | Social segregation in comprehensive schools in Sweden. |
| 1981:5 | H.G. Macintosh. Report on a visit to Sweden. |
| 1981:6 | Learning problems of junior level children - a Nordic joint research project |
| 1981:7 | Needs-oriented language learning for adults (BISVUX) |
| 1981:8 | List of projects 1981/82 |
| 1981:9 | Teaching processes - world conception and Educational Vocational Guidance (SIA-SYO) |
| 1981:10 | Swedish science subjects in an international perspective: curriculum, teachers and pupils (SNILLE) |
| 1982:1 | Basic skills in a longterm perspective (BAS) |

## Background

### The bilinguality of the deaf

Until some ten years ago, deafness was regarded as involving a severe linguistic handicap. Children who are born deaf fail to develop a spoken language, and were therefore regarded as without a language. Today, sing language is regarded as fully on a par with any spoken language. Deaf children develop sign language in the same way and during the same period as children who can hear develop their spoken language. During the pre-school period, the deaf children of deaf parents are therefore fully comparable, from the standpoint of both language and conceptual apparatus, with children who can hear. The deaf children of hearing parents, on the other hand, are in a worse position, unless their need of an early exposure to sign language is somehow fulfilled.

In a recently concluded project relating to the early linguistic development of deaf children, we have studied what measures must be taken to guarantee all deaf children the same development during the preschool period (0 - 7 years of age) as children who can hear.

We concentrated on an analysis of what takes place in families where the parents and children are both deaf. This analysis focussed on the purely linguistic interplay, but other aspects of the parent-child relationship were also considered. The content of the linguistic interplay was influenced to a high degree by the parents' faith in the competence of their children, their attitude of reliance vis-à-vis the future, and their deep insight into the nature of the handicap.

The insights we acquired into communications between deaf parents and their children were utilised in the instruction of hearing parents. Instruction was provided both formally,

in the form of courses, and informally by meetings between hearing parents and their children, deaf parents and their children, and other deaf persons.

Our efforts must be classified as quantitatively very modest, but the effect was marked. The parents received formal instruction for c. 60 - 70 hours and attended informal meetings with the deaf for perhaps 150 hours over a total of 1 1/2 years, starting when the children were between 18 months and 2 1/2 years old. The children were not exposed to any special training or teaching. When the children subsequently, at the age of 3 - 4, were compared with the children of deaf parents, all discrepancies in developmental level had disappeared. These results and other experiences have inspired parents throughout the country to acquire a similar knowledge, and it is now becoming increasingly common for deaf children of preschool age to display a level of linguistic, cognitive development that is fully comparable with that of hearing children of the same age. (Reports on the project have been printed in the series Forskning om teckenspråk /"Research in sign language"/, FoT, published by the Department of Linguistics, Stockholm University, S-106 91 STOCKHOLM, Sweden). This means that deaf children are learning their first language, sign language, in a normal manner: it does not mean that they are bilingual.

For the learning of Swedish as a second language, deaf children are highly dependent upon teaching. However, the teaching traditionally provided by the School for the Deaf is not adequate, being based on a by now discarded linguistic approach, by which language is identical with speech, and the road to Swedish therefore runs via speech. This view of language has indeed been abandoned by the School for the Deaf, but it has not been replaced by any new pedagogic concept of what Swedish means for a deaf student with sign language as his or her first language.

## The project Sign Language and the learning of Swedish by deaf children

During the 1970s a general change became evident in the approach to the deafness and sign language, a change that also modified the aims laid down by society for the teaching of the deaf. Thanks to the struggle of the deaf themselves, to TV and the mass media, and to research into sign language used by the deaf, sign language has been recognised by society as the deaf's first language. This has lead to a demand that the objective for the teaching of the deaf should be bilinguality. This demand is currently being formulated in the official instructions relating to application of the 1980 Basic Comprehensive School Curriculum by the School for the Deaf. The result, it may be claimed, is that the School for the Deaf is under pressure from two different directions, without having been given the necessary help to escape from the vice. Children arrive at the school with a language that the teachers recognise as a language, but of which they themselves have no complete command. Society is demanding that the deaf should be accorded a teaching that will lead to bilinguality, without giving the teachers either a proper description of the subject or any training in "Swedish as a second language in the School for the Deaf". The task adopted by the "Sign language and learning of Swedish" project has therefore in practice been a description of the Swedish language as it appears to a deaf learner. It is intended that this description shall provide a basis for teacher training and in-service training in the teaching of the deaf in accordance with the new curriculum.

## Swedish in the School for the Deaf a new subject

Swedish as a subject in the School for the Deaf differs in various ways from both Swedish as a native language in the school system at large, and Swedish as a foreign language. It is thus not directly comparable with English as a foreign language.

The teaching-matter that is imparted in the teaching of Swedish as a native language in the 9-year comprehensive school should essentially be imparted, in the case of deaf students, in sign language. Swedish in its written mode will be a necessary complement to the "spoken" mode of sign language.

Teaching in Swedish as a foreign language for children with another spoken native language than Swedish is conceived as a support to natural learning. Such teaching shall also aim at bridging the gaps between the Swedish culture and that of the child's home, and supporting a real bi-cultural identity on the part of immigrant children. Swedish in the School for the Deaf, on the other hand, aims at increased participation in the culture of the parents. The parents' native language is in most cases Swedish.

English as a foreign language aims not at cultural participation, but at giving the students opportunities for social contact on an international level. The same aim should apply for the teaching of English to deaf students.

Deaf students need a knowledge of Swedish in its written form as a complement to sign language, in order to achieve cultural participation. This presupposes consciuos lingusitic instruction that is not based on natural learning.

Since Swedish fulfills precisely the function of the written language, it will enter also into various other subjects, even if the language used in teaching is sign language. Even if the teacher can freely express himself in the language, he will need to use Swedish words even at the lower level, which is to say while the students are still beginners in Swedish. Since sign language cannot be written, the students need Swedish

words as an aid to memory, for example a stencil covering the parts of the body. It is natural and right that such a stencil should contain a picture of a human being, with arrows pointing to different organs such as the heart, lungs, arms, legs, stomach etc., and the Swedish words. At the same time, this need for Swedish words presents the teacher with a great temptation to provide teaching in Swedish at the expense of imparting actual knowledge in what we term in Sweden the "orientational" subjects (such as civics, history etc.). An awareness of purpose on the part of the teacher is required to ignore spelling errors, mistakes in gender, grammatical incongruities etc. and to concentrate on the heart and the circulation of the blood, if that is the matter being taught.

Silent Swedish

To a deaf student, Swedish is first and foremost written Swedish. It is written Swedish to which the students have access, and their primary need is to be able to read and write. We therefore need a description of written Swedish as an independent system. The available descriptions of Swedish treat written Swedish as an (imperfect) representation of spoken Swedish. Such descriptions thus presuppose a large and important body of information, as being already known to all those who can hear.

For anyone who cannot hear, Swedish is first and foremost a system of squiggles arranged from left to right in rows, and formed into groups. To define these squiggles as consonants and vowels, referring to how they sound, is pointless in this context. They have no sound, any more than "!" and "?". Instead, we have to describe the squiggles in "!", "?", "m", "n", "a" etc. with reference to the function they have in the system. We must then give rules for how the squiggles are combined into groups, such as "file", "life", "-ing", "es" and so on. After that we must describe how the groups can be combined either into new groups such as "filing", "files" and "lifetime"

or "Peter files it" or "Eva loved life". A description of such combinations at all levels is not, however, sufficient. We must also be able to say what the different combinations mean and why we sometimes have to have groups of squiggles that mean nothing, like the "It's" in "It's raining". As soon as we speak of meaning we have to compare Swedish with the language the students know. When, in the teaching of English, we are to say what a word or a phrase means, we do this - at least at the beginners' level - by telling the students what it means in Swedish.

In the same way, in the teaching of Swedish, we must be able to indicate meaning by saying what it is in sign language. When faced with the task, in the teaching of English, of explaining such grammatical oddities as "Do you drink tea?", we do it by a comparison with the way in which Swedish expresses the same thing, "Dricker du te?". Similary, in the teaching of Swedish in the School for the Deaf, we must be able to explain Swedish grammar by reference to how things are expressed in sign language.

We do not, however, need to explain the things that Swedish and sign language have in common, only what is different. We therefore need a description of the differences, in order that we should be aware of what is not self-evident to the student. This description should contain things like why we say in Swedish "Det regnar", "It's raining", when in sign language the sign "to rain" is quite sufficient. The description should indicate that we have two types of question in Swedish, what their functions are and how they are formulated, the difference between main and subordinate clauses, and so on. Many of the facts about Swedish required for such a description can be obtained from the research in Swedish as a target language that was performed during the 1970s, in projects run by the National Board of Education. We are working, in the TSD project, on further information specifically applicable to the comparison between Swedish and sign language. The aim of the project is

thus a description of the structure of silent Swedish as compared with sign language, and of the place of Swedish in the teaching of the deaf, as compared with sign language. This description is directly aimed at teacher training, and at the in-service training of teachers already active.

We are aware that the description on which we are working involves an entirely new way of thinking, compared with the earlier teacher training. We are also aware, however, that increasing numbers of those teaching the deaf are adopting a similar orientation on their own initiative, and are therefore concerned to have precisely a description of this kind.